# *Faceschooling*: yes, we can use Facebook to teach.

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**Abstract:** The use of Facebook in educational environments is no longer new, however up to date there is no a standardized methodology such that teachers can implement to exploit and potentiate the use of this social network as a formal tool for educative purposes. That is normal because in general there are better learning platforms (LP) to do this such as Moodle or Blackboard. However, in developing countries such as Mexico it is not yet common that public educative institutions implement LP to facilitate online work even though it is increasingly common that many teachers and students use social networks like WhatsApp in a regular basis to communicate between them, share information, files, links, etc. In this paper we show the experience we had from testing Facebook as a substitutive learning platform and conclude that this social network is very suitable to be used with educative purposes. To support our conclusion, we describe five features in which the use Facebook is akin to any other learning platform.

**Key words:** Facebook, learning platforms, mobile learning, social networks, education, educative technologies

## 1. Introduction

Facebook is basically an asynchronous communication platform designed for web 2.0. This means that the user can interact with both the system and other participants, adding, altering or simply commenting on the information placed on the platform, specifically, in the space called the wall (The Wall). Originally, Facebook was designed for communication and entertainment purposes among Harvard students, following a format that emulates the traditional school almanacs where the individuals are presented through their photo and a description of their profile and likes, however as we all know the platform soon expanded from Harvard to the entire Boston area and, finally to almost any point in the world where a network signal arrives. According to Facebook newsroom the number of active Facebook users worldwide have reached 2,23 billion (monthly), what makes this social network the most used among others such as WhatsApp (1.5 billion users) or twitter (336 million users).

There is no doubt then, that Facebook is at the heart of the *boom* produced by social networks which are significantly modifying the ways in which people interact with each other mediated by technological devices but also in the way in which individuals particularly youngsters, build their own identity with the help of this same devices. However, leaving aside these important social aspects, we can find that social networks in general but Facebook in particular, have begun to be useful as social communication tools for different purposes, for instance during the US presidential election in 2012 Facebook played a significant role in the campaign of the democratic

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party, so much so that the British newspaper *The guardian* has advanced the power of this social network as a political force: *Digital analysts predict this will be the first election cycle in which Facebook could become a dominant political force. The social media giant has grown exponentially since the last presidential election, rendering it for the first time a major campaigning tool that has the potential to transform friendship into a political weapon.*

The implications of this remain to be seen however the "population density" represented by the large number of Facebook users is already enough to ensure that a message transmitted through this channel has great opportunities to reach very far and to many people, at least in principle. In this context another use for Facebook that is being explored is that of an alternative and informal LP. Although its original design was not to fulfill that purpose, some of its features can be adapted without great difficulty to do this job working almost like (or maybe sometimes even better) than one of the formal LP such as Moodle. In great part this is due because students tend to react in a better way when they use a less formal mean of communication, but we are not going to extend much in this since the work of Selwyn (2007) has already made an excellent approach to this issue, so in what follows we will instead describe five interesting features collected in our experience using Facebook in school activities.

## 2. Extending the educational environment to the web 2.0

The experience showed in this paper is based upon two different courses developed in a high school located in the heart of the historic downtown in Mexico City. This school is special because it is a project between the National University and the local government with the purpose to offer middle education for the disadvantaged, since this school is located a very poor and violent neighborhood. The school has only four classrooms and two spaces with computer equipment that students can use for only a couple of hours because it must be shared with their classmates.

The subject of both courses was an introduction to philosophical thinking, we attended two groups of 25 students each in a blended modality, so we interact face-to-face with the students a couple of hours a day but also use a Moodle platform that the National University provided to deliver the lectures of the syllabus and hand in the assignments of the students. In our work with the two groups we could observe that although the Moodle platform was self-sufficient in terms of the content required by the objectives of the syllabus, it was frequent that students asked for help to reinforce the understanding of many concepts that were hard to understand due to their philosophical origin. Since students did not want to receive a failing grade they needed help constantly with the readings and their assignments, but face-to-face time was not enough and many of the inquiries were about the same subjects so many times we had to explain same things several times.

Communication with Moodle`s chat and forums was not efficient due principally to the fact that after school hours students did not have any access to the platform again, the main reason for this was that as they were from poor families that could not afford a computer. This was a real problem because the course was going on, topics were growing in complexity and time was ticking, so we needed quickly a more efficient way of communication.

Since recently I had attended an excellent MOOC offered by the Indian Institute of Technology on mobiles for development, I realize that all my students had their own mobile[2] (all of them with an Android OS), so we could easily use it as our *avant-garde* tool for the urgent improvement in our communication. As I mentioned before most teachers and students in Mexico tend to use WhatsApp as an auxiliary way of communication in the school context, but I never liked this option mainly because in this social network messages are organized as queues, in a linear way pushing older messages that are easily lost in the swarm of many other incoming messages. For that reason, I preferred then to open a Facebook page for each of the groups as showed in figure 1




Figure 1: Facebook pages opened for each group, links are still available

My election of Facebook as our communication tool was also based in three more aspects. The first was that Facebook is very easy to consult from a smartphone, and all my students already had a Facebook account. The second was the familiarity students had with it since it is a very popular and accessible social network, with very appropriate functions for synchronous and asynchronous interaction. Finally, was the consideration of the plasticity this social network has to share and exchange information between users for it supports many kinds of files such as mp3, mp4, mov, doc, pdf, ppt, png, and URL among many others. Thanks to this plasticity, we found that Facebook has a set of interesting features and useful for the development of the teaching work, either formally or informally.

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[2] I realize this because I had to struggle all the class with the fact that many of my students were "discreetly" checking their phones every five minutes.

Some of features we detected were the following six:

a) As a means for recovering experiences in class and reviewing topics.

b) As a means of conceptual reinforcement and go deeper into the issues.

c) As a means to share individual experiences.

d) As a means to share specific information.

e) As a means of communication with the teacher, both synchronously and asynchronously.

f) As a means to share open and free knowledge resources.

Now we will briefly describe the experience in each case providing an example of such utility.

## 3. Some Facebook features suitable for schooling

a) *Recovery of class experiences.*

A first feature that we found clearly useful was that of recovery of experiences from the class. We use a photographic record of the class activities that were published on the page (figures 2 and 3). For instance, figure 2 shows some work that the students elaborated on an activity about methodology and scientific thinking. Students made some infographics explaining what the features of experimentation are, what is a hypothesis, a theory, etc., and then they took the pictures and put them in the page so any further reference to this topic could be consulted there. The record that was made on Facebook not only allowed the activity not to be lost in time but served as a further reference when the students needed to review that part of the course. The same thing happened with another activity shown in figure 3, in which the students discussed arguments for and against the question "*are we free or are we determined*?", the discussed the issue in class and put the results in a comparative chart.

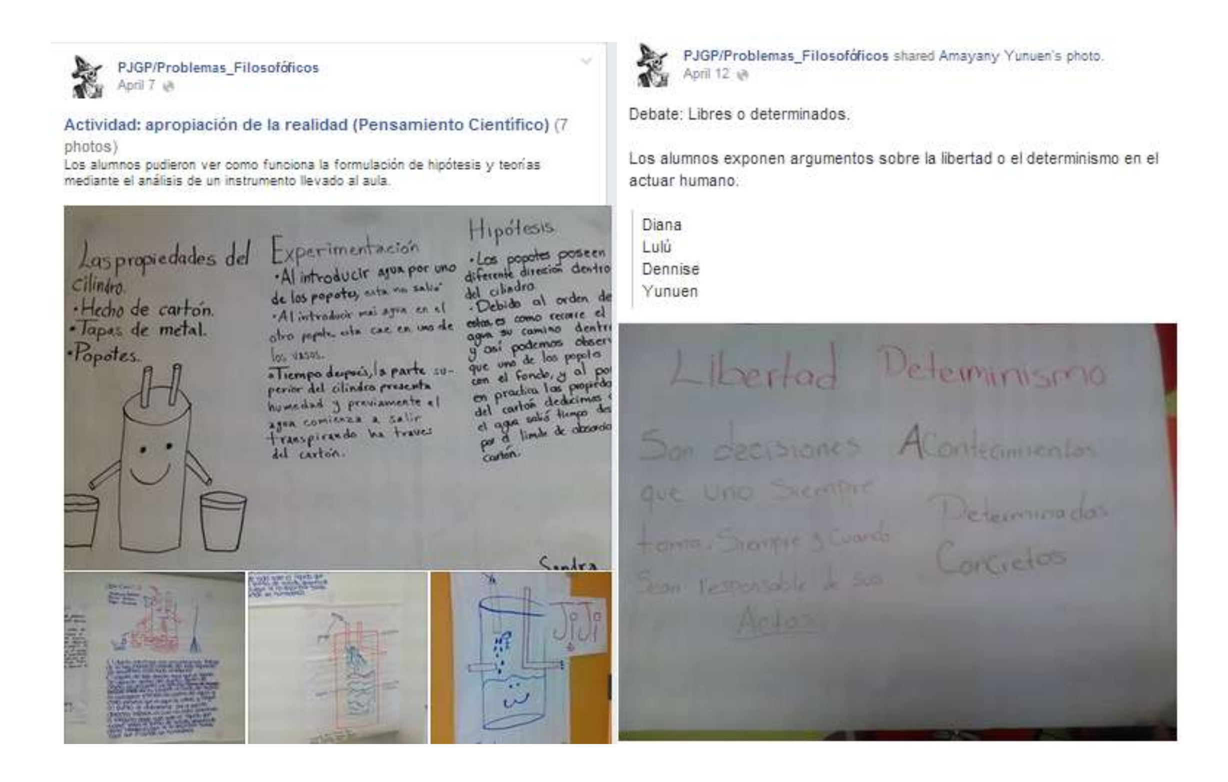
*b) Conceptual reinforcement*

Facebook was very useful also to share with my students many complementary materials that were made to make them clear about some important concepts of philosophy. I elaborated specific material with the help of some software I found online to make comics, infographics and videos. At this moment it is very important to mention that I had not the possibility to share this material through the Moodle platform of the course because the contents showed there are highly static, for “static” I mean that those contents were created by the designer of the course and we the teachers are not allowed to modify, extend or reduce in any way such contents, moreover we have only the non-editing teacher role along the whole course, that was also another reason why we should look for an alternative way of communication.

The additional material of reinforcement was of two kinds:

a) *Ad hoc* material made to answer specific doubts of the students (figure 4)

b) Links to already made materials found online related with some general doubts.




Figures 2 and 3: Recovery of materials produced in class.




Figure 4: Reinforcement material shared through Facebook

For instance, in figure 4, I made a comic in bitstrips (www.bitstrips.com), that tried to make clear the definition

and difference between two main concepts in the study of philosophy, that between a-priori and a-posteriori which generated many doubts among the students because they often forgot their meaning or confused each other. This material in turn allowed students to have a constant reference to the important concepts in a playful way and in a public space to which they are accustomed to access on a regular basis such as the Facebook wall. The thing was that effectively they used Facebook whenever they wanted to review the topics.

Figure 5 shows the most common case of conceptual reinforcement used in our experience: providing additional study materials related to the subject. In this case students were addressing issues of aesthetics and art. Doubts had arisen about whether art has a social function or is a purely contemplative discipline. To encourage a constructive debate on the subject, students were provided with a text entitled Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art (1938) wrote by the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, the French writer André Breton and the Russian leader exiled in Mexico León Trotsky. This text allowed them to discuss the issue in the page and to have notice of an important part of the History of contemporary art in their country.




Figure 5: Work materials shared in the Facebook page

d) Share individual experiences and / or specific information

Another utility that we could see during the work in Facebook was that students were able to share individual experiences and specific information. Of course, this is obvious since Facebook was explicitly invented for that end, but in this context, we mean that students shared information not in a random way but in a directed one, according with the instructions of some specific activity in a coherent and ordinated way. This showed us that students respond well to the development of formal assignments even though they were working in an informal medium, as we show in the next example.

Topics in unit 3 of the course were related to theories of political power, the meaning of democracy and importance of citizen participation in its construction. To show this importance students were asked to identify some specific and recurring problem in their communities and then present the problem to their classmates and then discuss the way it affected their environment and try to figure out a solution. Students then took advantage of Facebook to share the results of their inquiry (figure 6). They use their telephones to take photos and show the problem mentioned in a rawer way.




Figure 6: A token of assignments enriched with media

e) Communication with the teacher

As we all know Facebook also has a messaging system that can work both synchronously and asynchronously. The "chat" mode is not enabled in the "page" function, however if both the teacher and the student are connected at the same time, communication can be made in real time if not, messages are saved so that the user can read them later. Figure 7 shows a message of a student that could not deliver his homework in time. The great advantage of Facebook chat versus the Moodle chat lies in two features, the first one is that if you have the App of FB messenger installed in your phone then you will receive an automatic notification whenever someone writes to you, instead Moodle chat needs to be reviewed by you entering to the platform, so If you have an important message but you did not check your Moodle you won’t be aware of it. The second feature is that Facebook messenger can deliver many sort of files (PDF, Office, mp3, etc.,) so you can still share info in a private manner, that possibility is out of reach in Moodle as well as in Blackboard.




Figure 7: Communication Student -Teacher

f) Sharing open and free educational resources.

The last feature we found in our experiences was that Facebook gives students and teachers the opportunity to share some free and open educational resources made by themselves. For instance, when we discuss the issue of fallacies we thought that the topic was so significative that it would be adequate and funny that we made a podcast with the most representative fallacies acknowledged to share with other students. In order to make the subject significative for the average Mexican youngster, we thought that it would be nice to present it in an entertaining way so we have the idea of use some popular sayings that are very famous in Mexico so any one could understand every example and be able to find the relation between popular knowledge called by the Greeks as doxa and the corresponding fallacy whenever it was the case, and most of time in was!

We were working for a whole week in the libretto and recording the voices in the recording app of the smartphone of one of the students. Finally, I integrated the materials using Microsoft Moviemaker and add some slides with the examples of fallacies to give emphasis to the definitions and examples of each fallacy. After that we upload the mp4 as a video-podcast in YouTube and share it via Facebook (Figure 8).




Figure 8 Video-podcast shared in Facebook

The experience of doing our own and original educational resources was very interesting because it gave to students an extra reinforcement in the learning of an issue that was difficult for them. Writing the libretto and doing

the recording made things clearer to them, and such a clarity in the understanding of the topic was finally translated to the podcast. Finally sharing the material as an open and free resource was perceived for them as an effort to contribute to the extension of culture and knowledge among their fellows, family and if possible the whole world.

## 4. Conclusion

The most interesting results of the experience that we have just described are related to the degree of participation in which the students were involved through the activities and discussions developed through a Facebook page. This allowed us to realize about certain potentialities in the educational uses of this social network and of the way in which the resources of the page can be managed for educational purposes. There is no doubt that the basis of our success was fluency in communication and exchange of information, which includes clear instructions and attractive assignments. The free and public feature of Facebook represents another great advantage because anyone can have access to this resource without technical instruction and free of fee.

As we have seen, the use that a social network like Facebook can achieve as an auxiliary support for the teaching - learning process has many interesting potentialities due to its functionality within the web 2.0. These potentialities show that the use of this type of tools can go far beyond entertainment, becoming a powerful means of relevant information transmission and interaction among students in an easy and fast way very suitable in a world in constant change. Besides, a well-directed use and constant intervention of the teacher (who in this case works as moderator in the forums and discussions), allows students to develop the skill of dialoguing in a logical and rational way, at the time they learn to find a positive and constructive use of the social networks which are maybe the most powerful mass communication tools, influencing and making trends in hundreds of millions of people around the world of today.

We consider that this can be extended to other types of social networks, about which there is still little research regarding their uses as auxiliary didactic tools, such as Tumblr (www.tumblr.com) or Instagram (www.instagram.com). The implications that this type of new tools have for education are still to be seen, but from the outset it is plausible that the use of these virtual spaces on mobile devices such as smartphones, phablets or tablets, can further expand the horizons of online education formal as well as informal, allowing that apprentices have control over when and from where they wish to learn (Mohamed Ally, 2009).

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